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The Long Tail of Blogging: A Nurturing Mechanism for Sustainable Online Communities with Niche Interests

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Abstract

A qualitative study of the motivating factors behind sustainable weblogs is presented, based on the dissection of group behavioural characteristics in the common practice of two niche interest music blogs. Preliminary observations suggest that the emerging business consumer demographic known as the “long tail” (Anderson, 2006) is at play in the ecology of the blogosphere.

Keywords: Blogs, Social Networking, the Long Tail, Web 2.0

Introduction

In the epic 1987 graphic novel “Watchmen,” a superhero named Ozymandias, at one point in the narrative, waxes lyrical about how prognostication can be made possible through multi-screen viewing (Moore and Gibbons, 1987). Immersed in the video output of a wall of televisions all tuned to different channels, he argued, permitted the viewer to reshuffle words and images, sidestepping rational analysis and in the process allowing subliminal allusions of the future to seep through, if only peripherally. Ozymandias was in fact referring to the so-called “cut-up technique” of avant-garde American novelist William S. Burroughs, who would sometimes construct a book by tearing up his manuscripts and randomly patching them together (Rubinstein, 1999). The emergence of wisdom through literary collage in this cut-and-paste manner is known as appropriative writing and the blogosphere is a premiere example of its digital manifestation: A virtual universe of blogs containing a hotchpotch of interlinked verbal and visual musings where the whole is sometime greater than the sum of its parts.

Some critics of open source styles of applications development would argue that blogging promotes mediocrity (e.g. Keen, 2007). But this paper would argue that blogs provide a framework for the sustainability of miscellaneous categories that would otherwise be consigned to the forgotten realms of history (Weinberger, 2007). Blogging, in effect, supports the “Long Tail” of knowledge, creating a networked infrastructure with a distribution power that can disseminate a greater number of otherwise hard-to-find nuggets of wisdom in small quantities than more popular chunks of knowledge that are available en masse (Anderson, 2006). The idea of the long tail originally referred to a type of consumer demographic in business whereby profits could be made by selling small volumes of rare items to many patrons over a longer period of time. However, the concept in this paper deals with the sustainable promotion of eclectic knowledge, idiosyncratic in

quality, that is associated with niche consumer products not necessarily of a popular, mass-market nature.

The weblog is a tool for the creation of social networks where the shared sense of place forges a community bonded by a common, often idiosyncratic, forte. Generally self-produced using third-party applications such as Blogger, weblogs (or blogs) are web sites that employ a time-stamped record format to facilitate the publishing of personal or topical information on a periodic basis (Lindahl and Blount, 2003; Herring et al, 2004). Johnson (2005) contends that popular culture, by and large, has evolved over the past 30 years to become more complex in intellectual depth. Blogging is a tool that is forging communities of interest dealing with niche cultures, providing a platform for multi-layered analyses of television, cinema, graphic novels and music of all genres. Blogging is a “crowdsourcing” movement par excellence (Surowiecki, 2005). Blogs have been instrumental in establishing social networks of niche interest groups (Nelson, 2006).

Why Blog?

Blogs appeal to special interest groups in this age of information overload and “shrinking attention spans”, which has implications for publishers and companies aiming their products and services at niche markets (Bar-Ilan 2004). Recommendations made by bloggers with regards to the attractiveness of a creative product, such as a novel or an album by an independent musical performance band, have a greater impact on the intended audience than do reviews in mainstream newspapers. Blogging also offers writers a forum to express their views to the intended audience, thus refining their writing in the process through feedback from readers (Nardi et al 2004).

Blood (2002) outlined five motivators behind blogging, namely documenting pursuits of interest, expressing viewpoints, revealing deep feelings, conveying ideas, and establishing online communities. Persistent motivation should be an indispensable feature of bloggers. Such motivators, according to Miura & Yamashita (2007), include the recognition and appreciation from blog readers in the form of *comments*. Based on the theory of reasoned action - as originally developed by Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) - Hsu & Lin (2008) advanced a technology acceptance model for blogs. They discovered that perceived ease of use and perceived enjoyment were critical factors that stimulated active involvement in blogs in terms of initial creation and ongoing maintenance. This has been corroborated by Miura & Yamashita (2007) who discovered that the release of the Japanese version of widely-used blogging tools and the availability of free blog services led to the rise in blogging in Japan.

When it came to participation on the part of blog readers, altruism, reputation of the moderator, and community identification influenced positive attitudes (Dhar et al 2007; Hsu & Lin 2008). However, perceived usefulness, an attribute often associated with IT acceptance in a work-related context (e.g., Davis, 1989), did not play a part in shaping a mind-set towards blogs. According to Guadagno et al (2007), blogging can be a favoured medium for creative individuals, who are generally more likely to explore the unknown. These are analogous to the early adopters as defined by Rogers (2003) in his theory of the diffusion of innovation. Quality of content coupled with inherent social value is of paramount importance in the sustainability of a blog, according to Du & Wagner (2006), as well as the usability of the underpinning online technology. The content value is determined by type of information presented, frequency of postings, and the aesthetics of the blog: The latter being emblematic of Marshall McLuhan’s famed aphorism, “The medium is the message.” The technology facilitating the act of blogging makes their conception a generic proposition for writers and even easier for readers to review and leave comments (Blood 2004), thereby relating this factor to ease of use, which can contribute to the diffusion of blogs. The social value of a blog refers to the affiliations of the blogger (reflected by community membership and the list of inter-connected blogs), and the number of blog readers leaving comments (Wagner & Bolloju, 2005). Lovink (2007) put forward the theory that blogs that can only attract zero comments are not sustainable in the long run. In fact, Herring et al (2005a) emphasize the value of social recognition in blogosphere.

Despite the meteoric rise in the number of blogs, there are many that have faded into oblivion due to inactivity. In this paper, we outline a qualitative investigation into the motivating factors that guide the blogging experience to a sustainable practice. This paper presents the findings of a study of representative blogs maintained by individuals renowned for their niche knowledge by a

community of like-minded blog readers, as part of a larger longitudinal project on blogs as social networking tools in the evolution of niche cultures and its implications for the Internet, marketing, and broader issues associated with social software.

Research Methodology

We adopted a qualitative research methodology as we were interested in finding out “how social experience” was generated and given meaning in relation to the blogs (Gephart 2004). Therefore, an “interpretive, naturalistic” approach was deemed appropriate for the study (Denzin & Lincoln 2006).

The research strategy outlined in this paper follows a multiple case study methodology as espoused by Yin (1994). Case studies are considered to be appropriate when a phenomenon is inadequately substantiated in theory, or when contextual factors need to be captured. The focus of case study research is on developing a detailed account analysis of one or more cases. It involves the exploration of a case (or multiple cases) over a period of time by means of elaborate and in-depth data collection from "multiple sources of information rich in context" and presents rich empirical findings and discussions of the phenomenon under study (Creswell 1998). Furthermore, the “how” and “why” aspects of the study warrant the use of case studies (Edmondson & McManus 2007; Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007). Case studies have been widely used in research on information systems (Benbasat et al 1987; Boehm & Ross 1989; Darke et al 1998; Sauer 1993; Walsham 1995) and in electronic commerce (Sarkar & Cybulski 2002).

We chose to analyse two paradigmatic cases from the realm of music blogging, namely exemplars from the two niche genres of “world” and film music, considered to be cultural prototypes within the broad spectrum of music and we anticipate that the selected cases would provide valid generalisations (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007). Both cases shall remain anonymous to protect the privacy of those who use these blogs and are identified via respective codes.

The Music Blogs: Case Studies

Music blogs typically contain biographical information regarding the artists or their songs, and discussions about their releases. Also present are links to the artist website, their label, similar artists and downloadable sample tracks in mp3 format (Wolk, 2005). Music blogs differ from peer-to-peer file-sharing services in that they discuss and contain mp3 samples of songs by alternative artists and rare works of music, and can induce readers to purchase music. While this does not fare well with major record companies and certain legal bodies, these blogs are seen as useful promotional tools for alternative artists and independent record labels. In many blogs, the links to mp3 downloads are either sanctioned by the labels and the artists, though bloggers have been known to disable these links upon complaints from these parties.

Nearly since the inception of the LP record, Marshall (2003) notes that bootleg collectors and traders of music deal with creative product that has usually never been released commercially on a legitimate label. These collectors are differentiated from “pirates” or “counterfeiters” who reproduce and distribute music that have already been released on authentic commercial record labels. In fact, it can be argued that bootleg collectors have always been an active force in keeping niche areas of music alive. With blogging a new tool exists to build geographically-disparate communities that can embrace and rejuvenate moribund artforms: Chinen (2006) comments that jazz music experienced a resurgence of interest that can be directly attributed to the power of the blogosphere. Ross(2008) offers a similar argument with respect to the classical music genre. Blogs, in the main, are then a new distribution platform for the bootleg collector and this is especially true with respect to world and film music.

In this paper, we take an in-depth look at two blogs, one devoted to “world” music and the other to film scores. Both blogs are representative of the issues that we aim to study in this paper (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007).

Despite the inherent differences, world music and film score enjoy a steadfast cult following amongst a niche community of enthusiasts who are more often than not both a listener with an eclectic knowledge of a particular genres of film or world music, as well as a die-hard collector of CDs or LPs (Karlin, 1994; Manuel, 1998; Thomas, 1997). Because of the niche demand for this artistic product the major record companies tend not to release these on compact disc for mass consumption. To cater for these markets, specialist record labels emerged in the 1970s to release rare film score, primarily in the U.S., and in the 1980s to record and distribute various forms of world music in the U.S. and in Europe. In one sense, even before the advent of Web 2.0 and its ilk, the cult of world and film music as an aural pastime evoked a kind of informal social network.

The World Music Blog

The blog was established in mid-2005 and has been updated frequently with information and commentary on “ethnic arts and world cultures”, broadly termed as "world music" in English-speaking countries. Furthermore, it presents listings and gig guides for dance and music performances, workshops, and festivals, and is affiliated with a radio show aired by a community broadcaster. Podcasts of the affiliated radio show and playlists are also posted on the blog, along with YouTube clips of performances and artist interviews.

The blog was discovered by mostly by undertaking a search on “world music” on the Google blog search, and it was also linked to other relatively well-known blogs that specialized in African, Latin, or global fusion music. The blog posts mp3 audio files of alternative, obscure, or out-of-print world music, the links to which are removed after a week. Links to online stores were also provided.

The author's establishment and running of the blog was primarily motivated by his immense passion (almost to the point of “obsession”) for world music and his enthusiasm to share it with like-minded people on the net. The blogger reported positive reactions from the artists and record labels, both claiming to have evidenced a steady rise in legal downloads and CD sales. No artist or label had ever complained about the mp3 links. On the contrary, they conveyed their appreciation of the blog and offered promotional mp3s and interview opportunities. Though, blogs generally do not receive any interest from major labels, the World Music blogger was approached with promotional material from a large record company, the offer of which was turned down as it was inappropriate to the content.

The blog has gained popularity amongst world music aficionados, with an average of approximately 756 visits a month from readers world-wide. The links to the podcast of the radio shows have encouraged some readers to tune into the radio show. Previews of music festivals and concerts have encouraged attendance by blog readers. Despite the apparent popularity of the blog amongst the community of world music fans, the blogger was disappointed with the sparse comments to the reviews. The only means for feedback from readers were via conventional emails, phone calls during radio shows, and personal contact during events.

The Film Score Blog

The Film music blog has been active since May 2007 and 1332 comments were posted in that month alone. In June 2007 comments spiked to a high of 1656 and they haven't dipped below the January 2008 low point of 714, making this blog one of the more popular ones amongst film music aficionados. Each month there are lively discussions on esoteric aspects of film music soundtracks and related topics.

Members make requests for mp3 versions of film music soundtracks, mostly those that are out-of-print or bootleg, either as LP records or CDs. Other members then post a comment providing a URL link to a web-site that facilitates the sharing of these files, chiefly via free uploads and downloads that are subject to certain time-limit restrictions. (Often these files are reported by anonymous scrutineers and then the online storage enterprises delete them from the respective

web-sites for reasons of copyright infringement.) Peer-to-peer sharing is not used as a mechanism of distribution by this blog. Music files sampled at a high-bit rate are of particular value in this community with 320 kbps being most sought after in download traffic. The provision of scanned CD or LP record covers of the soundtrack is also an asset. Some music files are produced as “rips” from DVD source material with the resulting content being edited into individual tracks. At times, producers of these derived soundtracks endeavour to clean up the sound quality. This is especially true if it is the case of a LP record being digitised.

The blog maintains a de facto code ethics with one central precept being that only out-of-print soundtracks can be shared. Comments have been made defending the rights of independent film music soundtrack manufacturers such as Intrada and Film Score Monthly and the respect accorded to these enterprises manifests itself by no public sharing of currently available products. Exceptions are made to this ad-hoc rule: During Christmas 2007 a narrow window was opened to allow unrestricted sharing. At times, at the discretion of the blog moderator, a currently available soundtrack posted by a member was made available for a few days and then the URL was removed. (Private sharing appears to have no restrictions with a “Private Share Directory” available on the blog featuring a list of e-mail addresses of members willing to exchange any available soundtrack via URLs.)

Film Music blogs are not merely a web-site to obtain free soundtracks. Their distribution is couched in critical dialogue that both informs and educates in a succinct fashion. The works of nearly forgotten film music composers, destined unjustly for obscurity, are resurrected for new audiences in this forum. Even devoted followers of mainstream film music can discover something of worth that they may have overlooked. A case-in-point being American film composer Mort Garson, whose death in January 2007 prompted the blog moderator to create a special tribute section where samples of his work were available for download. One individual is the moderator of the blog and his duties include the monthly categorization of contents. The moderator also initiates monthly projects within the community soliciting compilations of specific aspects of film music.

Discussion of Findings

Fascination for the music and creative outlet for expression were cited as strong motivators to start the blogs. Financial gains were the least motivating to them, therefore confirming the findings of the Lenhart & Fox (2006) study. Sustainability, however, was a pressing concern for the bloggers. The World Music writer voiced regret about the sparse comments left by readers in proportion to the size of readership. Yet, the continued interest in actively pursuing development of the blog was attributed to acknowledgement and appreciation from the artists or the labels, who believed the reviews on the blogs had contributed to music sales and general interest in the niche community. The radio show also experienced a gradual growth in the listener base due to the blog. On the other hand, the blogger of the Film Score received satisfactory comments from readers, who explicated a genuine interest in exploring the fringe areas of film and world music and exercising their creative talents at novel means of music compilation that registers an imprint of shared personalisation.

Both bloggers were commended for their insightful reviews and presentation of mp3 samples and YouTube clips. They respected the intellectual property of the artists and producers by offering only a few tracks (as a sampler), and providing written disclaimers on the blogs - disabling links at the behest of the owners of the work. Moreover, the bloggers had embraced a de facto code-of-ethics with regards to the distribution of recorded music: That which is in current commercial release is strictly traded via private share mode (i.e. e-mail transaction) and not through postings on the blog. Special respect in the latter regard is also accorded to the work product of independent producers who indicated their earnest gratitude for championing the artefacts and making their work known to the growing niche community of readers. One of the profound aspects of the music blogs were the authenticity of the viewpoints expressed, devoid of manufactured public relations spin, which enhanced their reputation amongst the community of aficionados.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

The reported increase in sales and general interest in the particular world music and film score, albeit gradually and dispersed geographically, reveal the long-tail effect of blogging described by Anderson (2006). Thus, the long tail phenomenon was considered an important motivator toward the sustainability of the blogs.

Recognition of the sincerity and enthusiasm of the bloggers by readers as reflected in the depth and coverage of content and its presentation had undoubtedly led to a favourable and positive attitude toward the blogs and enhanced their reputation. In her exposition on the current renaissance of the analogue LP record, Dell (2008) observes that part of its appeal as a musical artefact is social experience factor: Congregating around a record player is a physical act conducive to discussion about the shared listening event. Live concerts of all musical genres evoke a similar communal passion channelled towards a directed interest. Music blogs are a similar social platform for appreciative expression that forges communities of niche interests for the shared common good.

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